

Dear Mr Key

I am writing to you as representative for the Helensville electorate to raise some issues to do with fireworks in the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area. Specifically, the risk fireworks pose to our natural environment, as well as the people of the area.

The Waitakere Ranges Local Board contains most of the Heritage Area. The Board area is 82% covered in native vegetation and contains 40% of the native vegetation in the Auckland region. The whole Heritage Area is deemed to have national significance, and there are many high value ecological areas and outstanding landscapes. Many private residents' properties and public land are Significant Ecological Areas under the Proposed Auckland Unitary Plan.

As well, many settlements and dwellings are surrounded by forest, so people and their houses are especially at risk from fires in the Heritage Area. The terrain is rugged and often inaccessible, with few roads. There is no reticulated water in many areas. There are no paid firefighters, so fires are attended by volunteers and it is common to see crews travelling distances to other settlements to assist in fire fighting.

There is a history in this area of fireworks causing fires in the forest and coastal areas, both on public and private land. Many fires attended by our volunteer crews are caused by fireworks or devices such as flares.

We are perturbed by the recent pattern of fireworks being let off on private social occasions such as parties, or taken to our beaches or parks to be let off, beyond November 5. Many parties seem to be accompanied by fireworks and people are stockpiling fireworks to let off throughout the summer period. This is of course when the forest is driest. The Heritage Area is close to the country's largest metropolitan area which adds to the risk of people coming out to the coastal areas with fireworks.

This problem has been exacerbated by the proliferation of fireworks' outlets, especially pop-up outlets. During the selling period, people headed to the forested areas and beaches will pass multiple pop-up stores, roadside container outlets and inappropriate outlets, such as the Mad Butcher.

We have read the Report of the Government Administration Committee into Petition 2011/127 of Charlotte Purdy.

The petition was motivated mainly by concern about domestic animals and the report does not deal at all with the risk of fire to significant natural areas.

The committee rejected various approaches that were raised by the Fire Service including a limit to the number of nights private individuals could let off fireworks. The Committee also rejected the Australian approach where private use of fireworks is banned in all but one state. Overall, the Committee decided to take little action because of the problem of enforcement and because "many New Zealanders value as a nostalgic family tradition".

In our area, it is not just locals in their backyards causing the problem (and these are often holiday renters with little understanding of the risks), but young people who drive into the area specifically to let off fireworks.

In our area, Auckland Council bylaws forbid the letting off of fireworks in all public places. This includes parks, beaches, roads and carparks. A recent bylaw has also prohibited the letting off of fireworks on private property if they could enter and cause a fire in a nearby forested area.

These bylaws are regularly flouted, but when concerned residents have rung police at Henderson, they have been told it is not a priority. Of course, most of our coastal communities are remote, and it takes about 30 minutes for a police vehicle to arrive, by which time the perpetrators have disappeared.

Sometimes our volunteer fire crews attend and put out bonfires on beaches and stop young people letting off fireworks. It seems wrong that volunteers should have to give up their time because regulators and enforcement authorities are not adequately controlling fireworks sales and usage.

In addition, when crews are called on to fight fires caused by fireworks or flares and the like, they are often operating in dangerous locations, usually with no road access. I have personally seen local firefighters controlling fires caused by fireworks in the pitch black on the cliff edge, such as Tasman Lookout and Lion Rock, both at Piha.

You have to ask why firefighters should be called on to risk their lives because regulators have not put in place an adequate regulatory framework and on-the-ground back-up to prevent these incidents.

The Local Board would like to discuss this matter further with you. We are supported by a number of ratepayer groups in our area, including.....

The matters we would like to discuss include:

1. Should other agencies have the power to regulate firework use? For example, Auckland Council polices backyard burning. Could it have the powers around the use of fireworks.
2. Should there be constraints on fireworks sales and usage in or near areas of high value natural and conservation environments? The Heritage Area has an Act of Parliament which recognises the national significance of its heritage features.
3. Should sales be restricted in some way to appropriate established retailers?
4. Should the sales period be further restricted?
5. Is a ban in private use appropriate in conservation and adjoining areas?

We would appreciate your response to the matters we have raised and the opportunity to discuss these further.

Yours sincerely

Sandra Coney
Chair
Waitakere Ranges Local Board